

43. Never too late to restart with God

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Moving from Genesis 34 to Genesis 35 is like going from a desert to a beautiful garden or from an emergency room to a wedding reception. The atmosphere in Genesis 35 is one of faith and obedience, and the emphasis is on cleansing and renewal. God is mentioned 10 times in chapter 35, and He used His name El Shaddai, which means "God Almighty, the all-sufficient One." Best of all, in chapter 35 you see Jacob's family finally making progress and arriving at the place of God's appointment.

However, Jacob's new step of faith didn't prevent him from experiencing new problems and trials. During this period of renewal, Jacob buried both his father and his favorite wife, and to add burden to bereavement, his firstborn son committed a terrible sin. Being a victorious Christian doesn't mean escaping the difficulties of life and enjoying only carefree days. Rather, it means walking with God by faith, knowing that He is with us, and trusting Him to help us for our good and His glory no matter what difficulties He permits to come our way. The maturing Christian doesn't pray, "How can I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?"

You might be in the situation where you've been maneuvering around the difficulties without God. Isn't it about the time for you to say, "I am done, God. I need You in my life"? This might be your first encounter with the Lord or this is the first opportunity for you to come back to Him from your backsliding. Please know this: It is never too late to restart with God.

A. REVIVAL IN JACOB'S LIFE

Genesis 35:1-5 Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother." 2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone." 4 So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem. 5 And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

The good news of the Gospel is that we don't have to stay the way we are. No matter how many times we've failed the Lord, we can go to Him again if we truly repent and obey. It happened to Abraham, Isaac, David, Jonah, and Peter, and now it's happening to Jacob.

God had called him to go "back to Bethel", back to the place of the vision and the vow. When a person is backslidden, as Jacob was, there is nothing else for him to do but go back to the place of dedication and renew his vows.

Many of the problems in Christian life and local churches result from incomplete obedience. We know what the Lord wants us to do, we start to do it, and then we stop. When we don't continue to obey God and accomplish His will, even what we've done will start to die.

Before he could take his family back to the altar, however, Jacob had to “clean house” – the foreign gods and the jewelry associated with heathen worship had to be put away permanently.

This shows us the tremendous leadership role man is supposed to have as a priest of the house within his family. A man who gets right with God will see the effect in his family. No matter how hard we try to teach our children godly conduct they will still do what the parents do.

You may say, “Pastor, I don’t have a husband.” Then you become that role model. Your children don’t need to seek a role model from selfish over-paid basketball players or football players or dope addict movie stars or singers. You live in such a godly way that they can proudly say, “My mom and dad are my role models.”

It is important for everyone to take note of what they may have in their home that is ungodly stuff, such as Ying-Yang symbols, buddha statues, dragon pictures or American native Indian religious artifacts. You must promptly get rid of those things from your home. You may say, “Come on, preacher. It’s just a decoration.” How about having Christian decorations instead of occultic decorations?

Here is the more important thing to talk about: Many times, we live in a lifestyle of partial obedience to God. But God wants us to obey Him with all of our hearts. Remember what I taught you last Sunday? Partial obedience is complete disobedience.

B. GOD’S REASSURANCE TO JACOB

Genesis 35:6-15 So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. 7 And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother. 8 Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth. 9 Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel. 11 Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. 12 The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” 13 Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. 14 So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. 15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.

When Jacob finally arrived at the place God told him to go, Jacob immediately found a great blessing. God appeared to him, God blessed him, and God called him by his new name ‘Israel’. The relationship is restored. God does the same with us, reminding us who we are in Christ.

Jacob did not need to hear anything new from God. He just needed to be reminded of what was true and encouraged to cling to Him with everything. It is the same with us. We already know everything that we are supposed to follow God from the Bible. We need to remind ourselves through His Word that we may stay in the course.

In his first Bethel experience, Jacob had seen God and the angels in a dream, but now the Lord appeared to him in some special way and blessed him. God reaffirmed Jacob's new name "Israel" and His own name "God Almighty" which is El Shaddai in Hebrew.

The name "El Shaddai" appears 7 times in the Word of God. This is an immutable, unbreakable promise that God made to father Abraham and the entire future Hebrew people.

Genesis 17:1-2 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

This promise has changed the world. Every Jew upon the face of the earth is a living testimony of the faithfulness of Almighty God. And this God who keeps His promise to Abraham is the same God that keeps His promises to you and me through Jesus Christ.

C. THE BIRTH OF BENJAMIN AND THE DEATH OF RACHEL AND ISAAC

Genesis 35:16-29 Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labor. 17 Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also." 18 And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. 19 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). 20 And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. 21 Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. 22 And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: 23 the sons of Leah were Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; 24 the sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin; 25 the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, were Dan and Naphtali; 26 and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maidservant, were Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram. 27 Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt. 28 Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. 29 So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Jacob has a pretty messed-up dysfunctional family. His family makes the American soap opera family look like nothing. God used this family, but not because they were such great family magazine cover candidates, but because He had chosen them by His grace alone.

"Ben-oni" means "son of my sorrow" or "son of my trouble," not a very favorable name for a man to carry through life, reminding him that his birth had helped cause his mother's death. Sorrow would overshadow his every birthday and whenever someone calls his name. But Jacob is not about to let that happen to him, so he called his new son "Benjamin," which means "son of my right hand," that is, a son to be honored with joy. Saul the first king of Israel came from the tribe of Benjamin and the apostle Paul was also a Benjamite.

Here is one interesting point. Tradition places Rachel's tomb about a mile north of Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, but Jeremiah said it was near Ramah, 5 miles north of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 31:15.

Bethlehem was known for two things during the OT time – the birthplace of king David and the death and burial place of Rachel, but primarily for the death of Rachel. But because Jesus was born there, we have "tiding of great joy" instead of tears of sorrow. Matthew, the author of the Gospel of Matthew connected Jeremiah's reference to Rachel with Herod's murder of the innocent children in Bethlehem. The birth of Jesus brought joy – "Benjamin" and also sorrow – "Ben-oni."

In v22, we see something that people would see on the Jerry Springer Show – a son having sex with his father's concubine. But Reuben's sin involved much more than the satisfying of a lustful appetite. For a son to take a father's wife in this manner was a declaration that he was now the head of the family. One of king David's many sons, Adonijah's request to have Abishag who was his father's concubine as his wife was the same as challenging king Solomon's rights to the throne in 1 Kings 2:13–25.

It would appear, then, that Reuben's purpose was to take over the leadership of the family, which made his deed only that much viler. Like the young Prodigal Son in our Lord Jesus' parable in Luke 15, Reuben couldn't wait to get his inheritance. He had to have it now.

Jacob did nothing immediately, but surely his heart was broken by what his son had done. Reuben showed some character in protecting Joseph from death, but he wasn't able to save him from slavery in chapter 37. Though Reuben was the firstborn, his brothers didn't seem to respect his leadership. In his old age, Jacob exposed Reuben's sin and deprived him of the rights of the firstborn, giving them to Joseph in chapter 48.

Those who teach that our dedication to the Lord automatically protects us from troubles and tears need to read this chapter carefully. Certainly, God had forgiven Jacob, and certainly, Jacob was walking with the Lord in faith and obedience now. Nevertheless, he still had his share of trials. If we obey the Lord only for what we get out of it, and not because He is worthy of our love and obedience, then our hearts and motives are wrong. We become the kind of people satan accused Job of being – mercenary believers.

D. PERSONAL SELF-EXAMINATION

Many people are religious enough to go to church on Sunday, but they live for themselves for the rest of the week. It is no wonder why so many churches in America are powerless against satan and the ungodly influences of the world. They try to be politically correct and they embrace homosexuality and consider pre-marital sex as a norm.

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to see where we are in spiritually:

1. Do I love to read and meditate on the Word of God daily? Yes or No
2. Are my daily devotions consistent and meaningful? Yes or No
3. Do I practically apply God's Word to my everyday life, including personal relationships with others and even to my political opinions? Yes or No
4. Am I quick to recognize and agree with God in confession when I have sinned? Yes or No

5. Do I consistently seek forgiveness from those I wrong or offend? Yes or No
6. Do I consistently obey what I know God wants me to do? Yes or No

As Jacob finally came to the Lord, we all need to come back to the Lord and be diligently obeying what the Lord tells us in His Word. To make that happen, we need to do these:

1. We need to make a covenant between ourselves and God.
2. We need to destroy and remove any idol out of our hearts.
3. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to govern our hearts.
4. We need to bring Jesus as our Master in our lives.